**World Geography / Quebec Sovereignty**

**New England roots in French Canada**

Today, over 5 million people in New England are descendants of one of the greatest

diasporas in North American history — the migration of almost 1 million French-Canadians

to the U.S. from the mid-1800s to the Great Depression in 1930.

Have the students locate the New England states on their maps (Maine, New Hampshire,

Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut). Have them draw arrows between the province

of Québec and this area. On their time lines have them mark the period from 1850-1930 as

"La Grande Hémorragie". In English this means "the great hemorrhage". Overcrowding and

increased stress on the land forced thousands of French to move south in search of new

opportunities.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, new shoe and textile factories began to open in the New

England area providing thousands of unskilled-labor jobs. Entire families started to relocate

to the U.S. This was a sad time for the Québécois because whole communities were emptied

out in the process. However, these Franco-Americans, as they are called, adapted well to

life in the U.S. setting up "little Canadas" in the cities and maintaining some semblance of

their culture. Today those with French ancestry in the New England area form a direct link

between the histories of Canada and the U.S.

**The Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and the Quiet Revolution in Québec**

Between the 1930s and the 1960s the French-Canadians remained undereducated, mostly

rural, religious, and mainly laborers for the English-owned businesses. It wasn’t until the

1950s that the intellectuals in the community started to speak out against Church control

over their lives and English dominance politically and economically. In 1960 a new premier

was voted in in Québec, Jean Lesage, who sparked a political movement in Québec similar

to the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. The new government started to take back

ownership of Québec businesses from the English and to set up policies and laws to protect

the French language and culture. The popular slogan of the time was, "Maître chez nous!" In

English this means, "Masters in our own house!"

In both the U.S. and Canada the 1960s were a dynamic time when all people who felt

oppressed — Native Americans, African Americans, women, the French in Canada — started

to fight for fairer treatment and equality. In the U.S. the African American movement was

called the Civil Rights movement while the battle for French language and culture in Québec

was called the Quiet Revolution. On their time lines have the students mark these two

movements during the 1960s. In Québec the battle for more freedoms had to do primarily

with the control the Catholic Church over the lives of the French Canadians.

Both the African Americans and the Québécois went through a cultural revival during this

time — music and literature were being performed and written as never before. At last,

after centuries of oppression, both groups were gaining a voice and were not ashamed to

express themselves. This was also a time when names for ethnic groups were being

changed. In the U.S. "Negro" was replaced with the name "African American" to

acknowledge the ancestral and cultural link to Africa. In Canada the French replaced the

name "French-Canadian" with "Québécois" in an effort to define themselves more by the

province of the first colonists than by that of the country of Canada. This was also the time

when the province instituted language laws to protect the French language.

The Quiet Revolution wasn’t entirely quiet though. During the 1970s a group formed called

the Front de Libération du Québec (The Québec Liberation Front) or, more popularly, the

FLQ. This was a small terrorist group that set bombs in garbage cans and eventually

kidnapped a diplomat and provincial politician murdering the politician. This event caused an

uproar in Canada. The War Measures Act allowed the government to arrest without a legal

warrant anyone they suspected. Compared to the U.S., Canada fortunately saw relatively

little violence during this period.

**Québec and the Constitution of Canada**

The most recent issue between Québec and the rest of the country has been the absence of

Québec’s inclusion in the Canadian Constitution. Shortly after the American Revolution, the

Thirteen Colonies drew up a Constitution to which all agreed. This did not happen in

Canada. First, until 1982 the Canada’s Constitution was in Great Britain. In that year the

Prime Minister brought the Constitution home calling for certain amendments. Just as all

members of a club have to agree on the rules of membership, all Canadians (or all

provinces) had to agree on the rules, laws, and statements made in the Constitution. All the

provinces did agree — except Québec. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister, rather than

working with the issue until it was resolved, went ahead and amended the Constitution

without Quebec’s signature. This was very upsetting to the Québécois because, once again,

they felt that the English Canadians would rather bully them than include them as partners.

Though Québec abides by the Constitution, it does not feel that it is properly represented.

There have been many meetings and efforts since to include Québec in the Constitution, but

all have failed. In 1995 the Premier of Québec had a vote to see if the Québec people

wanted to leave Canada. By less than 1% the Québécois decided to stay in the country. It

was a very emotional time. Hundreds of English Canadians travelled across the country to a

huge rally in Québec just to tell the Québécois how much they wanted them to stay in

Canada. It was really like brothers and sisters from across the country letting their siblings

know that they didn’t want them to leave home and that they cared.

Every time the government makes an effort to amend the Constitution, somebody is

unhappy. Either the other provinces think that giving Québec special status is unfair, or

other minority groups think that if Québec has special status in the Constitution so should

they, or Québec isn’t pleased with the changes.

**Conclusion**

It is very difficult to say what will happen in Québec. Some Québécois think that a separate

country is necessary to protect their language and culture; others think this protection can

be obtained within the Canadian federation. Many English Canadians are tired of the

discussion and don’t understand why the Québécois feel so protective of their culture. Many

English Canadians think the Québécois have too many rights already. Many First Nations

people in Québec, who have been treated even worse than the Québécois and who have had

to struggle even harder to protect their languages and cultures, are tired of listening to the

complaints of a group so much more powerful than themselves. Many people in the States

don’t understand the problems in Canada and think that if the Spanish speaking people in

the U.S. are allowed language rights, that the U.S. will have the same problems as Canada.

Other Americans think that Québec is a model for keeping a minority culture and language

alive. This is a very complex issue that has no easy answers.

Time to reflect, think, ink:

1. Why do some people of Quebec desire to be independent of Canada?
2. After reading this article, how or why did this sovereignty movement gain momentum?
3. What you do think the future of independence holds for Quebec? Explain.